

FLYING TRIP TO THE KIMBERLEYS – JUNE 2015

By John and Robyn Emerson

We set off for our flight to the Kimberleys in Western Australia in early June 2015. We own a 4 seater single engine high performance French-built plane called a 'Trinidad'. It is a very comfortable touring aircraft which suited us very well for the 45+ hours flying time for the trip.



Map showing route taken

The first leg of our journey was from Cessnock Airport to Bourke for refuelling and overnight at the famous Birdsville Hotel (we have had many flights into Birdsville over the years). Refreshed and ready to go again, we set off for Kakadu National Park in Northern Territory, refuelling at Tennant Creek.



Plane outside the Birdsville Pub

We are familiar with the small dirt airstrip at Cooina which is just a short walk to the accommodation, and access to Kakadu Yellow Waters which is a World Heritage Area. There is an abundance of bird life, and crocodiles, which can be viewed from the specially designed tour boats that operate at dawn and dusk. A really spectacular place at any time of the day but to be on the water when the sun is rising and the wildlife is active is very special indeed.

A short flight took us into Darwin. The ground was still partially covered with water after the wet season.

After a few days in Darwin, we had an early start for a long flight to Cape Leveque on the Kimberley Coast, several hundred kilometres north of Broome. We have flown this route previously and never fail to be amazed at the beauty and remoteness of the area. Tides here are around 10 metres so the ocean is constantly moving and changing. Our accommodation at Cape Leveque was a very well appointed safari tent with views to the beach. There is also a small camping area but numbers are strictly limited. The restaurant at Cape Leveque is quite famous and the place was busy with tourists flying in from Broome on charter flights just to have lunch.



Kimberley coastline

We were very excited about the next leg of our journey to Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary and Wilderness Camp which was acquired by Australian Wildlife Conservancy in 2001. It covers an area of 3,580 sq. kms and includes the Fitzroy River and King Leopold Ranges. It is a research area and has gradually been restored to its natural state after being used as a grazing property.

So many birds, plants and native animals and creatures can now be found there. On a very early bird watching trip we saw a number of Gouldian Finches which are so beautiful and precious. There are great waterholes for swimming and canoeing (a few freshwater crocs but they are pretty harmless). The scenery is extraordinary.



Beach at Cape Leveque north of Broome at sunset



Gouldian and Long-tail Finches in the wild at Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary and Wilderness Camp

We then flew to Port Hedland for fuel and an overnight stop. It is the port for all of BHP's iron ore export shipments and there were 40 to 50 boats waiting to be loaded. A massive 24 hours all year round operation.

Everything in the town was covered by orange dust from the iron ore. Most of the local residents have been there for quite some time. Due to the large tides, a huge deep channel has been created to bring the ships into the loading area. (Dampier, further down the coast is a Rio Tinto port.)

Karijini National Park located in the Pilbara region of Western Australia was our next stop. Paraburdoo was the nearest airport to the NP and was created by Rio Tinto to service their mine at Mt. Tom Price and is a fly-in fly-out facility. Also, plenty of 4WD hire cars available. There were literally hundreds of 4WD vehicles lined up ready for the miners when they flew in. It was a very scenic drive to Karijini NP via the town of Tom Price. The National Park is very remote of course, and so beautiful and spectacular at the same time. The colours were extraordinary, and photos could hardly do justice.

We camped at Karijini and spent a few days walking through magnificent gorges and canyons full of pristine waterfalls and waterholes. A conducted tour of Rio Tinto's Mt. Tom Price iron ore mine was fascinating. Mt. Tom Price was a very rich source of high grade iron ore but is now a very large hole in the ground!

We overnighted at Newman which is a BHP town and also possesses a huge airport for FIFO's...all good for us. A long 4 hour flight then took us to Uluru/Ayers Rock. It was interesting to see the start of rock formations that form part of the landscape and ultimately Uluru. The 10.5 kms walk around the base of the rock was good exercise and a chance to view the monolith from all sides and every angle. It's really quite awesome. In June the overnight temperatures are around freezing with very cold evenings and mornings, and so nice when it warmed up later in the day!



Spectacular gorge scene at Karijini National Park

Our last night was back at the Birdsville Hotel before our arrival at Cessnock Airport later the next day. The Kimberley and Pilbara areas of Western Australia are fascinating and well worth a visit, despite the remoteness which is part of their appeal. Highly recommended. We certainly plan to do more flying trips to the Kimberleys.